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ABSTRACT

Terms and concepts currently in use in adult English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) instruction are defined and explained. They include: authentic or alternative assessment; computer-assisted language learning; critical literacy theory; family and intergenerational literacy; multiple intelligences and learning styles; practitioner inquiry, reflective teaching, and action research; project-based education; social identity; and workforce training, employability skills instruction, and SCANS (Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills). In each case, the scope of the term is specified and references to current literature are made. The SCANS skills are summarized. Contains 25 references. (MSE)

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ERIC Q & A

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National Clearinghouse for ESL Literacy Education

Current Concepts and Terms in Adult ESL

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While the field of teaching English as a second language (ESL) to adults has its own unique terms and concepts, it often draws from the professional vocabulary of other areas of education such as K-12, adult basic education, and higher education. This article presents a selection of such terms and concepts, discussing them as they are applied in the adult ESL context and citing sources where they are described with adult immigrant learners in mind. Some terms are broad, representing theories or approaches, while others might be more accurately described as methods or techniques. Most are mutually supportive and can be integrated in instruction to expand and enrich learning in any ESL setting.

Authentic or Alternative Assessment

Authentic or alternative assessment describes efforts to document learner achievement through activities that require integration and application of knowledge and skills and are based on classroom instruction. Ideally, these assessments are relevant to real-life contexts and include activities such as creating a budget, completing a project, or participating in an interview (Burt & Keenan, 1995; O'Malley & Pierce, 1996). Authentic assessments are criterion referenced, in that criteria for successful performance are established and clearly articulated. They focus on the learning process as well as the products and they include means for learner self-assessment and reflection (O'Malley & Pierce, 1996; Tannenbaum, 1996). Often, authentic assessments are used in conjunction with standardized tests to provide a more complete picture of learner progress.

Examples of authentic assessment include performance-based assessment, learner self-assessment, and portfolios. Performance-based assessment activities require learners to integrate acquired knowledge and skills to solve realistic or authentic problems, such as taking telephone messages, completing an application, or giving directions. Self assessment refers to checklists, logs, reflective journals, or questionnaires completed by learners that highlight their strategies, attitudes, feelings, and accomplishments throughout the learning process (O'Malley & Pierce, 1996). Portfolio assessment consists of a systematic collection of the learners' work (such as writing samples, journal entries, worksheets, recorded speech samples, or standardized test results) to show individual progress toward meeting instructional objectives (Fingeret, 1993).

Computer-Assisted Language Learning

The use of computer-based technologies for language instruction is known as computer-assisted language learning (CALL). Computer software, including multimedia applications, and the Internet and the World Wide Web are examples of such technologies at use in language programs today.

Computer technologies can provide a course of instruction, facilitate activities and tasks, or create opportunities for additional practice (Wrigley & Guth, 1992). CALL can also be structured to promoted teamwork and collaboration among the learners, a necessity for those programs with limited access to technology (Gaer, 1998). It can be incorporated in instruction as an integral part of a class, as an option that learners access individually, or in some combination of class-based and self-access models (Huss-Lederman, 1995). Using technology can sometimes be difficult. The planning process should involve consideration of at least the following elements: the needs and goals of the program, instructional focus, staffing, software and hardware availability or accessibility, learners' learning goals; and learners' and staffs' experiences with and attitudes toward computer use (Huss-Lederman, 1995; Wrigley & Guth, 1992).

Critical Literacy Theory

Critical literacy theory expands the discussion of literacy practice beyond the basic functions of reading and writing. Where traditional literacy instruction might focus on skills such as decoding, predicting, or summarizing, critical literacy theory encourages critical examination of text, especially the social, political, and ideological elements present. Based in the assumption that literacy practices have the capability to both reflect and shape the issues and power relationships at play in the larger society, critical literacy theory seeks to empower learners through development of critical and analytical literacy skills (Auerbach, 1992; Hood, 1998).

In the general sense, critical literacy theory encourages teachers to create instructional activities that help learners use analytical skills to question and respond to such elements as perspective, purpose, effect, or relevance of what they read and write (Hood, 1998). For example, a teacher might prompt learners to distinguish fact from opinion in a newspaper editorial or to identify an author's position on a topic and compare it to their own. The focus is on the learner as decision maker and active interpreter in reading and writing activities.

Family and Intergenerational Literacy

Family literacy has traditionally described the use of literacy within the context of the family, often as related to early childhood development and parental support of children's school achievement. Intergenerational literacy broadens that description, recognizing that relationships between adults and children, both within and outside the traditional definition of the family unit, affect the literacy use and development of all involved. Family literacy programs for ESL populations generally use family and family relationships as content and involve at least two generations of participants (Weinstein, 1998).

The goals of family and intergenerational literacy programs are varied. Some focus on the family and school, seeking to increase parental involvement, improve communication, increase schools' responsiveness to communities, and support children's academic achievement (Parecki, Paris, & Seidenberg, 1996). Others pursue broader objectives, such as furthering literacy skills development and positive behaviors linked to reading for both adults and children. Still others focus on facilitating the reconnection of generations divided by different linguistic and cultural experiences (Weinstein, 1998).

Multiple Intelligences and Learning Styles

Multiple intelligences and learning style preferences both refer to the ways that individuals approach information processing and learning. Howard Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences proposes that there are at least seven different abilities that individuals can develop to solve problems or create products:

- verbal/linguistic,
- musical,
- logical/mathematical,
- spatial/visual,
- bodily/kinesthetic,
- interpersonal, and
- intrapersonal (Gardner, 1993).

Each intelligence is distinguished by its own competencies and skills and directly influences the way an individual will interpret and utilize information.

Learning styles are the broad preferences that learners tend to exhibit when faced with new content or problems that need to be solved. These styles encompass cognitive, affective, and behavioral elements, and describe learners in terms of their preferences for group or individual learning contexts, the degree to which they separate details from complex backgrounds (field dependent vs. field independent), or their affinity for analytic, abstract perspectives as opposed to more integrated, comprehensive ones (analytic vs. global) (Oxford, 1989).

Awareness of different intelligences and learning styles, and individuals' preferences for them can help teachers create positive learning experiences (Christison, 1996; Oxford, 1989). By varying instructional activities to accommodate learners' preferences (lectures, visuals, hands-on activities, songs) or by offering options for responses to instruction (write a paper, create a model, give a demonstration), teachers can support learners' access to and understanding of content.

Practitioner Inquiry, Reflective Teaching, and Action Research

Practitioner inquiry, reflective teaching, and action research refer to a teacher-centered approach to professional and staff development. Like the learner-centered approach to instruction, which focuses on the needs of the learners and respects them as partners in the learning process, these approaches to professional development put practitioners at the center of the process defining, investigating, and addressing issues in their own teaching (Brookfield, 1995).

These models require practitioners to become researchers and take a questioning stance towards their work. Rather than focusing on their deficits, teachers concentrate on their strengths and interests as means for enhancing their knowledge and teaching skills (Foucar-Szocki, et al., 1997). The following steps are usually part of the process: reflecting upon practice as a means of identifying a problem or question; gathering information on that problem or question; examining and reflecting on the data gathered; planning some action based on the information; implementing the action planned; monitoring and evaluating the changes that may or may not result from the action; and collaborating or sharing with colleagues (Drennon, 1994). These terms and similar variations are often used interchangeably, their differences typically illustrating the elements emphasized. In other words, reflective teaching highlights ongoing self-assessment while action research focuses on planning, implementing, and evaluating actual changes in the classroom.

Project-based Education

Project-based education is an instructional approach that seeks to contextualize language learning by involving learners in projects, rather than in isolated activities targeting specific skills. Project-based learning activities generally integrate language and cognitive skills, connect to real-life problems, generate high learner interest, and involve some cooperative or group learning skills (Gaer, 1996; Institute for Research on Learning, 1998). Unlike instruction where content is organized by themes that relate and contextualize material to be learned, project-based learning presents learners with a problem to solve or a product to produce. They must then plan and execute activities to achieve their objectives.

Projects selected may be complex and require an investment of time and resources, or they may be more modest in scale. Examples of projects include a class cookbook, an international food bazaar, a folktale-based story hour at a local library, a neighborhood services directory, or a class web page (Gaer, 1996; Baum, 1997). In the selection of projects and activities, it is important to include learners' input, as well as to consider carefully how the project will fit with overall instructional goals and objectives (Baum, 1997).

Social Identity

The concept of social identity refers to the ways in which people identify and understand themselves in relation to others and to their environment (Ullman, 1997). It is complex and involves issues of self-perception and self-definition, ongoing psychological and cognitive development, interpersonal relationships, empowerment, and adaptation (Ullman, 1997; Zou, 1998).

For immigrant English language learners, discussions of social identity focus attention on the often dramatic transitions that they experience as they move from one sociocultural context to another, and the impact that this has on their acculturation and language acquisition. The process of aligning new societal expectations and requirements with previous cultural norms, individual perceptions, and experiences is preeminent in immigrants' lives, but often ignored. Examination of these social identity topics in the classroom can help to support learners' transition process and make it easier for them to acquire language. Suggestions for doing this have included eliciting learners' personal stories through portfolio writing, dialogue journals, large- and small-group discussions, improvisational dialogues and role-plays, and whole-class discussion of related issues such as perspectives on immigration or stereotyping (Ullman, 1997).

Workforce Training, Employability Skills Instruction, and SCANS

Workforce training (or employability skills instruction) represents an effort to integrate employment preparation into adult ESL curricula. It is not workplace instruction, where ESL instruction is taken into the work environment and linguistic objectives are

largely determined by worker and work-task needs analysis (Grognet, 1997). It also is not English for specific purposes (ESP), where vocabulary, structures, and concepts taught are those needed for a specific field or job. Workforce training attempts to incorporate employment skills training into ESL instruction, combining communicative and behavioral objectives with linguistic objectives to improve learners' abilities to function in an employment context.

Much of the content for workforce training has focused on the workplace competencies and foundation skills identified in the [Labor] Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills (SCANS) report (Brod, 1997-98; Grognet, 1997).

The SCANS Skills

Workplace Competencies

- Resources: allocating time, money, materials, space, staff
- Interpersonal Skills: working with others
- Information: locating, evaluation, organizing, and processing information
- Systems: understanding, managing, and improving systems
- Technology: interacting successfully in all aspects of technology use

Foundation Skills

- Basic skills: reading, writing, mathematics, speaking, and listening
- Thinking skills: thinking creatively, making decisions, solving problems, reasoning
- Personal qualities: responsibility, self-esteem, sociability, self-management, integrity (Brod, 1997-98)

The five competencies and three enabling foundation skills identify those skills necessary for success in any workplace setting, but which are transferrable to other life settings as well. They can be added to the adult ESL curriculum through classroom management and other methods that promote decision making, problem solving, individual and group responsibility, planning, and creative thinking (Grognet, 1997; Price-Machado & Damrau, 1997-98).

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